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ABSTRACT

This paper describes an ethnic studies course taught at Alverno College, Milwaukee, Wisconsin. The course is offered as a two semester, hour elective in the Weekend College which provides women an opportunity to complete a college degree by attending classes on weekends only. The course meets for three hours every other weekend for a total of seven sessions. Because Milwaukee has a large black population and a history of racial conflict, the course concentrates on comparing the experiences of the blacks with the experiences of immigrants. The first session explores the concept of ethnicity and relates it to contemporary American life. The next two sessions concentrate on the immigrant experience, addressing such issues as residential and employment patterns, generational tensions, and the process of adaptation, acculturation, and assimilation. The fourth and fifth sessions of the course deal with black life and history, emphasizing slavery, the conflicting strategies of Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. DuBois for black progress, and the black migration to urban-industrial America. The last two sessions are a comparative exploration of the black and immigrant experience. Required readings in the course are Colin Greer's collection of essays "Divided Society: The Ethnic Experience in America," Thomas Sowell's "Race and Economics, " and Federman and Bradshaw's collection of ethnic prose and poetry "Speaking for Ourselves." Students discuss the readings in class and write essays about them. Students are also asked to write a family history. Appendices contain a class calendar, sample class assignments, and a guide for a family history. (Author/RM)

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COMPARATIVE EXPLORATIONS OF THE BLACK AND IMMIGRANT EXPERIENCE: TEACHING ETHNIC STUDIES AT ALVERNO COLLEGE

Dimitri D. Lazo
Department of History
Alverno College

Annual Meeting
American Historical Association
Los Angeles, California
December 30, 1981

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COMPARATIVE EXPLORATIONS OF THE BLACK AND IMMIGRANT EXPERIENCE:
TEACHING ETHNIC STUDIES AT ALVERNO COLLEGE

Any discussion of the way in which I teach ethnic studies at Alverno College must begin with a consideration of the context within which I work. Alverno is a private liberal arts college for women in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. One of our most noteworthy features is our innovative competence-based curriculum.[1] Each student must develop and demonstrate her ability in eight distinct skill areas: communications, analysis and critical thinking, problem solving, valuing, social interaction, responsibility for the environment, understanding of the contemporary world, and the ability to respond to aesthetic works. Faculty are expected to create learning experiences in their courses which will lead to the development of competence in the students. Alverno enrolls about 1,300 students, 700 of whom attend the Weekend College. Now in its fifth year of operation, the Weekend College provides many women, especially those who find it impossible to avail themselves of the traditional weekday time frame, an opportunity to complete a college degree by attending classes every other weekend from 7:00 p.m. Friday to 5:00 p.m. Sunday. Most of our students are from the Milwaukee area, and a majority are beyond traditional college age. More than half of our weekday students, and over 90% of the weekend, are adult women over the age of twenty-three. We also have a high percentage of part-time students and most maintain full or part-time employment while attending school. Many are the first in their families to attend college, and a majority do so at considerable financial and personal expense. Our students, like those at many institutions, view their educations as practical investments from which they expect to reap a profit in terms of improved career and employment prospects.

One immediate and obvious result of such thinking is that about 3/4 of our weekday--and all of our weekend--students major in either Nursing, Management, or Professional Communications. In addition, the Departments of Management and Professional Communications offer very popular minors, and the newly instituted minor in Computer Studies is one of the fastest growing in the school.

All of this, of course, has had a serious impact on the Division of Arts and Humanities (comprised of the Departments of English, History, Philosophy, and Religious Studies). Each Department has experienced a decline in majors and minors, and those in the Department of History have quite literally disappeared. We graduated our last major student and our last minor this December, and we--along with the other Departments in our Division--have found it quite impossible to maintain a traditional program. The entire Division, therefore, has shifted its focus away from discrete disciplinary courses toward an interdisciplinary sequence for the general education student. This meant a reduction in the number of history courses offerred to the weekday student, and one of those to go was "The Minority Experience in America." However, I have continued to offer this course as a two semester hour elective in the Weekend College.[2]

I taught "The Minority Experience in America" as an elective in the Weekend College in the fall of 1980 and in the fall of 1981. The course draws well: 53 enrolled in 1980 and 34 in 1981. While our weekend students are a curious and highly motivated lot, they have had very little or no previous study in history, and they have very little--if any--interest in pursuing any systematic study in the subject. This means that rather than being an upper-level elective in history, as it is in many other institutions, my course in race and ethnic relations was likely to be the first and last course in history that the students were going to take. It was, therefore, incumbant upon me not only to introduce

my students to the subject matter of the course, but to introduce them as well to history as a discipline and as a system of thought. In addition, as a result of Alverno's competence-based curriculum, I am expected to provide my students with the opportunity to develop their ability to think critically and analytically, to understand and interpret the contemporary world, and to respond to aesthetic works.

My decision to concentrate on the black and immigrant experience was the result of my estimation of the students and their needs as educated citizens. Milwaukee is an immigrant city and most of our students maintain an active ethnic identification. Like other major urban areas, Milwaukee has a large black population and has had a history of racial conflict over such issues as open housing. A course which included a study of both blacks and immigrants--I hoped--would build a greater toleration in the students for each other and for those of different ethnic and racial backgrounds. I hoped that by examining the patterns of life and adaptation experienced by both groups in twentieth century urban-industrial America, students might even gain a bit of empathy for each other. Such a course, I hoped, would be an exercise in human relations. I should add at this point that I am a believer in the notion that people act as they think, that there is a clear relationship between thought and behavior. I also believe that values and attitudes can change as the result of calm and rational study. I am, in other words, an optimist who believes that education can and should make a difference in the way in which people think and behave. The biggest danger, I feared, would be a reaction on the part of my white students along the lines of: "My grandparents (or parents in some cases) came to this country as ignorant immigrants--no money, no skills, unable to speak the language. Look what they

accomplished. If they could do it, why not blacks?" The danger was that rather than building empathy and understanding, such a comparative study could backfire into an affirmation of ethnic and racial stereotypes.

And indeed, comparisons of the black and immigrant experience--especially in teaching situations--raise serious questions.[3] Are the two experiences really comparable? Was the legacy of slavery and racism so pervasive that it makes comparisons with immigrants meaningless? Does a comparison with immigrants trivialize race as a factor in the black experience? Was I, in fact, doing my students a disservice by approaching the material in this way? I have to admit that I have not fully resolved any or all of these questions in my own mind, and I doubt if I will. In fact, rather than attempting to do so, I turn them back to the students themselves for their consideration and discussion. This serves a dual purpose. First, it gives me the opportunity through class discussion to defuse the possibility of using black-immigrant comparisons to reinforce stereotypic thinking. Second, it gives my students the opportunity to confront real and pressing issues of historical interpretation--and to deal with these issues within the context of their own experience.

The selection of required readings was crucial if the course was to achieve the goals and objectives which I had set for it. The first time I taught the course (fall 1980), I used Oscar Handlin's The Uprooted, Meier and Rudwick's From Plantation to Ghetto, and Faderman and Bradshaw's collection of ethnic prose and poetry Speaking for Ourselves. However, after participating in the N.E.H. Summer Seminar on "Ethnicity in Twentieth Century America," I changed the reading assignments considerably. I replaced both The Uprooted and From Plantation to Ghetto with Colin Greer's collection of essays Divided Society: The Ethnic Experience

in America and with Thomas Sowell's Race and Economics.[5] I retained Speaking for Ourselves because I believe it is the finest and most convenient collection of ethnic writings on the market. I have found Greer's Divided Society to be of great value in the course for a number of reasons. First, through the excerpts from Milton Gordon, Colin Greer, and Michael Novak, it provides me with the opportunity to discuss the nature of ethnicity as a theoretical construct and as a force in contemporary American life. Second, it contains specific essays on blacks and immigrants as distinct groups, and third, it contains a number of essays comparing the black and immigrant experience. Sowell's Race and Economics is also useful for its synthesis of the black and immigrant experience and for its comparisons of those experiences. However, Sowell's book is most useful for its stimulating and provocative commentary on the role of race and ethnicity for social and economic mobility in the United States. But more about this later.

The course itself meets for three hours every other weekend for a total of of seven sessions. As indicated in the attached class calendar (see appendix 1), these sessions are divided into four general topics. The first session explores the concept of ethnicity and relates it to contemporary American life, the next two sessions concentrate on the immigrant experience. In particular I address such issues as residential and employment patterns, generational tensions, and the process of adaptation, acculturation, and assimilation. Not only do I expect the students to read the pertinent essays from Divided Society, but I also select ethnic poetry and short stories from Speaking for Ourselves which, I believe, illustrate the phenomenon under consideration (see appendix 2 and appendix 3 for samples of this poetry and for sample assignments). The fourth and fifth sessions of the course deal with black life and history. In this case

I emphasize slave life and culture (through a presentation on the current historiography of slavery with an emphasis on the work of John Blassingame); the conflicting strategies of Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. DuBois for black progress; and the black migration to urban-industrial America. The last two sessions of the course are a comparative exploration of the black and immigrant experience. It is at this point that Sowell's Race and Economics comes into play. Thomas Sowell has acquired a tremendous notoriety for the series of books that he has written on the theme of race and economic progress. His most recent book, Ethnic America, brought him guest appearances on "Meet the Press" and the "Donahue" shows and has stimulated a number of highly emotional reviews in both popular and scholarly journals.[6] Much of this attention stems from the fact that Sowell is a conservative black economist highly regarded by the Reagan Administration (he was at one time under consideration for the Labor Department in the Cabinet). Sowell basically argues that bias, prejudice, and racism--while important--are simply insufficient to explain the successes and failures of America's various racial and ethnic groups (and I recognize the extent to which I am over-simplifying his work). Needless to say, such a view--combined with Sowell's White House connections--generates much heat. A good exercise for students (as well as the instructor) is to compare Michael Novak's generally positive review of Ethnic America with that of Manning Marable. Marable, a black political scientist at Cornell University and a leading figure in the National Black Independent Political Party, refers to Sowell as "Reagan's Favorite 'House Nigger.'"[7] The question I put to my students is not just what do Novak and Marable think about Sowell's work, but why do they respond as they do? This question automatically leads us to a discussion of American pluralism

and the question of race and ethnicity in American life. I don't expect my students to solve the great social questions and issues of the day, but I do expect them to consider them with a greater appreciation for their complexity. I hope students will approach these issues and problems with a greater empathy and tolerance for those of other ethnic and racial groups.

It is at this empathetic level that I find my use of ethnic prose and poetry to be most valuable. Often a poem or a short piece of prose can be the vehicle by which cross-cultural understanding can occur. Students can read of immigrant insecurity, but they can feel the child's desperate nervousness in Harold Bond's poem "The Chance." They can read about the perfidious effects of racism, but they can feel Claude McKay's bitterness in his poems "If We Must Die" and "The White House." They can shake their heads about generational conflicts in immigrant families, but they share the anxiety in John Ciardi's poem "Letter to Mother," James T. Farrell's short story "The Oratory Contest," and Robert Laxalt's story "Sweet Promised Land." They can study the economics of black life in the early twentieth century South, but they share the sharecropper's hopelessness in Richard Wright's story "The Man Who Saw the Flood."[8]

A favorite assignment of mine is to ask students to write a family history[9] (see appendix 4). More than just a genealogy, I ask them to identify specific social and economic trends within their families and to relate those trends to the broader themes of race and ethnicity. Family histories not only serve to personalize the course for the students, but they also introduce them to historical methodology. They must deal with change over time, they must put events into a specific context and establish clear cause and effect relationships, and they must locate and use a variety of historical documents. It is, I think, an

excellent way of introducing students to history as a discipline. However, family histories are very personal projects and some students might be reluctant to write one. I have designed a number of alternate exercises for those students who, for one reason or another, prefer not to write a family history. Usually these involve reading and comparing novels and autobiographies reflecting one or another of the racial and ethnic groups.

In conclusion, I find the comparative study of blacks and immigrants to be a valuable exercise for both students and instructor. It provides us the opportunity to consider some of the most important issues of contemporary American life in their historical context. In particular, it allows the students and the instructor to become partners in a mutual exploration. It introduces students to historical analysis--both in the act of creating history through their family studies and through their evaluation of the current professional controversies surrounding Thomas Sowell. It suggests clear and meaningful relationships between aesthetic works and the basic human questions behind them. This course is a course in flux--as the contemporary scene changes it is conceivable that new groups and material will be added and other subtracted. I have, for example, been reading as of late on the Hispanic experience and, as I learn, I expect to re-consider my course on the minority experience. It is to this task that I now turn.

NOTES

[1]See Liberal Learning at Alverno College (Milwaukee: Alverno College Productions, 1979) for a discussion of the competence-based curriculum.

[2]I am happy to report that this course will re-appear as a four semester hour elective entitled "Race and Ethnicity in American Life." It will be taught for the first time next year through the Department of Social Science and Policy Studies.

[3]Scholars has grappled with these questions for some time. In particular see Robert Blauner, "Internal Colonialism and Ghetto Revolt," Social Problems 16(1969):393-408; Karl E. Taeuber and Alma F. Taeuber, "The Negro as an Immigrant Group: Recent Trends in Racial and Ethnic Segregation in Chicago," American Journal of Sociology 69(1964):374-382; Wade Clark Roof, "'The Negro as an Immigrant Group'--a Research Note on Chicago's Racial Trends," Ethnic and Racial Studies 1(1978):452-464; John J. Appel "American Negro and Immigrant Experience: Similarities and Differences," American Quarterly 18(1966):95-103; and Nathan Glazer, "Blacks and Ethnic Groups: The Difference, and the Political Difference it Makes," Social Problems 18(1971):444-461. Nathan Glazer and Daniel Moynihan, Beyond the Melting Pot: The Negroes, Puerto Ricans, Jews, Italians, and Irish of New York City (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1963) is, of course, a classic comparative study. Two recent works encourage me in a comparative approach: John Bodnar, Michael Weber, and Roger Simon, "Migration, Kinship, and Urban Adjustment: Blacks and Poles in Pittsburgh, 1900-1930," Journal of American History 66(1979): 548-565 and Stanley Lieberson, A Piece of the Pie: Blacks and White Immigrants Since 1880 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980).

[4]Oscar Handlin, The Uprooted (Boston: 1951); August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, From Plantation to Ghetto (New York: Hill and Wang, 1966); and Lillian Faderman and Barbara Bradshaw (eds.), Speaking for Ourselves: American Ethnic Writing (Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman, and Co., 1975).

[5]Colin Greer (ed.), Divided Society: The Ethnic Experience in America (New York: Basic Books, 1974) and Thomas Sowell, Race and Economics (New York: Longman, 1975).

[6]David Herbert Donald, "What Americans Bring to America," New York Times Book Review (August 2, 1981); Michael Novak, "Race, Culture, and Economics," Fortune (October 5, 1981), pp. 209 & 212; Paul Buhle, "Sowell on Thin Ice," The Nation (September 19, 1981), pp. 245-246; Maurice Berube, "Two Theses on Ethnicity," Commonweal 108(August 28, 1981), pp. 472-473; and Manning Marable, "From the Grassroots," Milwaukee Courier.

[7]Marable, "From the Grassroots," Milwaukee Courier.

[8]All of these stories and poems can be found in Faderman and Bradshaw (eds.), Speaking for Ourselves.

[9]A fine guide for family histories is Jim Watts and Allen F. Davis, Generations: Your Family in Modern American History (New York: Knopf, 1978).

Appendix #1

Class Calendar

Class Calendar

September 12, 1981: Introduction to Ethnicity

Reading: Colin Greer, "Remembering Class: An Interpretation," in Colin Greer, ed., Divided Society: The Ethnic Experience in America (New York: Basic Books, 1974)

Milton Gordon, "The Nature of Assimilation" in Greer, ed., Divided Society, pp. 39-51.

Michael Novak, "The Nordic Jungle: Inferiority in America," in Greer, ed., Divided Society, pp. 122-134

Michael Novak, "White Ethnics," in Lilian Faderman and Barbara Bradshaw, eds., Speaking for Ourselves (Glenview, Illinois: Scott. Foresman, & Co., 1975), pp. 542-550.

September 26, 1981: Immigrant Life in America: Generations

Reading: Mario Puzo, "Choosing a Dream" in Greer, ed., Divided America, pp. 109-122

Rudolph Vecoli, "Contidini in Chicago," in Greer, ed., Divided America, pp. 215-233.

Isaac Bashivis Singer, "The Little Shoemaker," in Faderman and Bradshaw, eds., Speaking for Ourselves, pp. 424-439

James T. Farrell, "The Oratory Contest," in Ibid., pp. 581-588

Robert Laxalt, "Sweet Promised Land," in Ibid., pp. 589-594

Joe Papaleo, "Italian to the Moon Over New York," in Ibid., p. 597

Harold Bond, "The Chance," in Ibid., p. 601

John Ciardi, "Letter to Mother," in Ibid., p. 607

Virginia Tatarian, "Photograph of Five Ancestors," in Ibid., p. 613

October 10, 1981: Immigrant Life in America: Work and Mobility

Reading: Pietro DiDonato, "Christ in Concrete," in Faderman and Bradshaw, eds., Speaking for Ourselves, pp. 552-561

Moses Rischin, "Jews in Ney York City: Urban Economic Frontiers, 1890-1920," in Greer, ed., Divided America, pp. 186-195

Richard Sennett and Jonathon Cobb, "The Hidden Injuries of Class," in Greer, ed., Divided America, pp. 261-274

David Brody, "The Sources of Stability: The Immigrants in Steel," in Greer, ed., Divided Society, pp. 293-309

Stanley Aronowitz, "The Working Class: A Break with the Past," in Ibid., pp. 310-327

October 24, 1981: Black Life in America: Slavery and Its Aftermath

Reading: Thomas Sowell, Race and Economics (New York: Longmans, 1975), pp. v-55

Booker T. Washington, Up From Slavery, pp. 209-226 (on reserve)

W. E. B. DuBois, Souls of Black Folk, pp. 41-59 (on reserve)

Richard Wright, "The Man Who Saw the Flood," in Faderman and Bradshaw, eds., pp. 85-88

Seth Scheiner, "The Negro at Work: Blacks in Harlem, 1865-1920," in Greer, ed., Divided Society, pp. 196-214

November 7, 1981: Black Life in America: The Twentieth Century

Reading: The following materials from Faderman and Bradshaw:

Hughes, Let America Be America Again," pp. 108-109
Dunbar, "We Wear the Mask," p. 112
Cullen, "Yet I DO Marvel," p. 117
Cullen, "Incident," p. 118
McKay, "If We Must Die," p. 119
McKay, "The White House," p. 119
Hughes, "My People," p. 121
Hughes, "Madam's Past History," p. 121
Hughes, "Madam and Her Madam," p. 122
Baraka, "Black Bourgeoisie," p. 124
Evans, "Status Symbol," pp. 138-139
Evans, "Vive Noir," pp. 139-141

AH 100: Class Calendar

November 21, 1981: Comparative Explorations of tho Black and Immigrant Experiences, I

Reading: Sowell, Race and Economics, pp. 59-238

December 5, 1981: Comparative Explorations of the Black and Immigrant Experience, II

Reading: Greer, "Immigrants, Negroes and the Public Schools," in Greer, Ed., Divided Society, pp. 83-93

Nathan Glazer, "Negroes and Jews: The New Challenge to Pluralism," in Ibid., pp. 94-108

December 12-13, 1981: FINAL ASSESSMENT

Appendix #2

Ethnic Poetry from
Speaking for Ourselves

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Appendix #3

Sample Assessments

Hs 043: The Minority Experience
Aesthetic Response

For the past few weeks you have had the opportunity to read a book, The Uprooted, written by one of America's foremost scholars of the immigrant experience. You have also had the experience of reading a variety of short stories and poems written by immigrants or the children of immigrants. We have discussed both the poems and short stories and the historical monograph in class. I would like you now to take pause and seriously examine the relationships between these aesthetic works and the historical context that produced them. I would like to see the results of this thoughtful examination in the form of a formal essay of at least 1,000 words. Please bring this essay with you to class one week from today.

Instructions:

1. This is a formal essay that should reflect your best efforts. It should be stylistically pleasing and free of all spelling and grammatical errors.

2. Select one of the following short stories from Speaking for Ourselves

   Robert Laxalt, "Sweet Promised Land," pp. 589-594
   di Donato, "Christ in Concrete," pp. 552-561
   Singer, "The Little Shoemakers," pp. 423-439

3. Select one of the following poems from Speaking for Ourselves

   Papaleo, "Italian to the Moon Over New York," p. 597
   Ciardi, "Letter to Mother," p. 607
   Tatarian, "Photographs of Five Ancestors," p. 613

4. Everyone must use this selection

   Jane Addams, "Immigrants and Their Children," distributed in class

Your task is to relate the themes and issues developed in these poems and short stories to the excerpt from Addams's autobiography and to The Uprooted. I will be especially interested to see you develop and deal with the concepts that emerge from your reading of The Uprooted. If you do not relate these works to The Uprooted, and to the material presented in class, you paper will be considered unacceptable.

Level Three of Aesthetic Response asks the student to deal with the relationship of the individual to society. The overall theme to your essay will be the relationship of the immigrant to American society. Please refer to the criteria for level three of Aesthetic Response in your syllabus.

In your last essay, you had the opportunity to establish the relationships between a series of poems, stories, and autobiographies and the immigrant experience. I would like you to build upon that exercise in the following way:

Below I have listed some materials relating to the Black experience that we have studied in class. I would like you to re-read that material carefully. Having done so, please answer these questions in the form of an essay.

1. To what extent do these materials reflect the Black experience in American history (NOTE: I will expect direct and specific references to Meier and Rudwick's From Plantation to Ghetto)?

2. To what extent does the Black experience parallel that of the immigrant? How do these materials reflect that parallel? (NOTE: again, refer to Meier & Rudwick).

3. To what extent does the Black experience deviate from that of the immigrant? How do these materials reflect that deviation? (NOTE: again, refer to Meier & Rudwick)

THIS ESSAY WILL BE DUE NO LATER THAN 5:00 p.m., Wednesday, April 2, 1980.

Choose one (1) from each group

Group One

James Baldwin, from Go Tell It on the Mountain
Richard Wright, "The Man Who Saw the Flood"

Group Two

Langston Hughes, "Let America Be America Again"
Countee Cullen, "Incident"

Group Three

Claude McKay, "The White House"

Alverno College
3401 South 39th Street / Milwaukee WI 53215

MEMO

TO: Students in AH 100: The Minority Experience

FROM: Dimitri D. Lazo, Instructor DL

DATE: November 23, 1980

RE: Final Assignment

During the past semester you have had the opportunity to consider the experiences of two of America's largest groups: immigrants and blacks. Not only have you read scholarly studies of these groups (The Uprooted and From Plantation to Ghetto), but you have read a variety of poems and short stories which emerged from their experiences. Furthermore, we have had the opportunity to discuss the ethnic experience in American life.

I would like you now to draw upon all of these resources--readings, discussions, previous assignments, etc--in writing a response to the poem "Let America Be America Again" by Langston Hughes. In writing this response, think less about the details of Hughes's life, or the fact that Hughes was black, but consider the broader statement he makes about American life.

To what extent does Hughes reflect the themes of the course in his poem? Please be specific in relating the poem to the other readings, discussions, and assignments.

I am purposely making this assignment vague because I do not want to stifle you creativity. You may concentrate on specific parts of the poem, you may expand upon the poem as a whole. Want I do want you to do is to relate the poem to the course, the use the poem as the stimulus for a broad synthetic essay. The form and direction of that essay is up to you.

Remember, this is a formal essay in which I will expect to see your best efforts. I want this essay to be correct in form, pleasing in style, and enlightening in thought and contant. Please adhere to all standard norms of the written language including proper use of the footnote or endnote. (Please feel free to quote or cite from all sources you deem relevant.)

I would expect this essay to contain at least 1,000 words (i.e., four typed double-spaced pages). Of course, you are free to go beyond that limit if you desire, but I will be disappointed if you fall substantially below it.

Please turn these papers in to me by Sunday, December 7, 1980. As you grade reports are due shortly after the 7th, I must have them at that time.

Good luck, and have a good holiday.

cc:

AH 100: The Minority Experience in America

Select one of the following poems. In what ways does it reflect the minority experience in America as we have studied it thus far? Make sure that you establish specific connections between the poem and the essays that we read in Divided America, between the poem and the other poems and short stories that we read in Speaking for Ourselves, and the material presented and discussed in class.

Joe Papaleo

Italian to the Moon Over New York

How many nights have you coldly gestured
while I missed the moments when the years flew,
and now I question your pendant face.
Gracious Moon, I have come
again in anguish
to admire you.
You watched the last night
upon the bay when I
might have sung to you.
You followed the ship
whose hopeful ones dreamed
of a golden trip
to a golden city.
Did you see me disappear
within a frame house
for my adopted years?
When did you see
the metamorphosis
of me? When children
mocked my halted speech?
If they could see reflected
in your light, how we
were young together
by olive trees, skies
that defy remembering,
could they be young
as one should be young?
But they hardly look
toward the sky,
and I must try
remembering again
what was too short
but happiness enough.
If they would only
turn their eyes to you,
with unbought luxury
we could admire you
whole evenings long
within a sky of stars

John Ciardi

Letter to Mother

It was good. You found your America. It was worth all
The coming: the fading figures in the never-again doorway,
The rankness of steerage, the landing in fog.
Yes, and the tenement, the reek and the shouting in the streets
All that night and the terror. It was good, it was all good.
It is important only that you came.

And it is good to remember that this blood, in another body, your body, arrived.
There is dynastic example in a single generation of this blood, and the example good.
But, Mother, I can promise you nothing.

This traveling is across the sprung longitudes of the mind
And the blood's latitudes. I have made a sextant of heart
And nailed my bearings to sun, but from the look-out
There is no hailing yet of the hoped-for land.
Only the enormous, wheeling, imperative sea.
And the high example of this earlier coming—

But there will be no Americas discovered by analogy.

History 043
The Minority Experience

Examination: Immigrants

The following is an excerpt from a short story by the Nobel Prize winning author Isaac Bashevis Singer. It is entitled "The Little Shoemakers." The main character is a Polish Jew named Abba, a master cobbler in the city of Brod. He was a man who took great pride in himself, his family, his work, and his heritage. Often when he worked he would sing a little folksong, an aire, and his children, themselves helping in the shop, would respond with the chorus. Those were the moments at which Abba felt himself at ease and at peace. All was well.

But all was not well for a Polish Jew in the 20th century. One by one Abba's sons left Poland and migrated to the United States. There they set up a shoe factory, along modern industrial lines, and became wealthy. Shortly after World War II they were finally able to locate their father and bring him to the United States, to New Jersey. This is where the story picks up.

YOUR ASSIGNMENT:

You are to read this except from the "Little Shoemakers" and respond to it. It what ways do Abba and his sons reflect the immigrant experience in America? Discuss the varieties and verities of that experience as it is revealed in "The Little Shoemakers." MAKE SURE your essay reflects The Uprooted and our class discussions. I will expect your essays to deal with the issues raised by Handlin and by your instructor.

You are to bring this completed essay to class with you next week. It will count for %50 of your examination. The remaining %50 will consist of a series of short answer questions which you will be asked to complete in class. Oh yes, I expect you to refer to the materials distributed on the xeroxed sheets as well.

These essays are formal exercises and should reflect your best efforts. They should be about the equivalent of 3-5 typed (double-spaced) pages.

Section VI--THE AMERICAN HERITAGE from "The Little Shoemakers" by Isaac Bashevis Singer was removed for copyright reasons

In the first part of your examination you were asked to write an essay dealing with the immigrant experience as seen through the eyes of the immigrant. Specifically, you wrote this essay as a response to an excerpt from a short story by Isaac Bashivas Singer. Now I would like you to write an essay dealing with the immigrant experience as seen from a different perspective. Many Americans were most disturbed with the influx of immigrants from eastern and southern Europe, and they feared (correctly) that America would be changed because of it. The readings listed below contain two of the more widely publicized arguments against immigration. Please study them and, in a full and well-developed essay, critique them. Why do they oppose immigration? What is their rationale? Why did they fear and distrust Catholics and Jews? Since these new immigrants were mostly Europeans, what is all the talk about race? Were these views typical of the time? Are they evident in today's America?

Reading #1 [early 20th century]

Old stock Americans have become restless. . . . They are dissatisfied with the denationalizing forces at work in the country. There is something wrong and the American people know there is something wrong, and they are talking among themselves as to where the trouble is. They know the arrogant claims of the Papacy to temporal power and that the Romish church is not in sympathy with American ideals and institutions. They know that Rome is in politics, and that she often drives the thin edge of her wedge with a muffled hammer; they have seen the results of her activities in other lands. They know the facts as to Rome's opposition to the Bible in our public schools and to our public school system itself. They know she is opposed to a free press, free speech, and to other democratic principles.

These old stock Americans are coming to believe that the Jews dominate the economic life of the nation, while the Catholics are determined to dominate the political and religious life. And they have apprehensions that the vast alien immigration is at the root an attack upon Protestant religion with its freedom of conscience, and is therefore a menace to American liberties.

They have seen Roman canon law come into conflict with American law, and they are not willing to have a foreign power dictate to them, or pursue a policy destructive to true Americanism. Many of these American patriots have heard about a great building now being erected in Washington in preparation as the residence of the Pope transferred from the Vatican to the national capital. And whether this is true or false, it is believed by a large number of citizens. At any rate, the American people know there is something wrong. They are afraid of the race groups that adhere to their own language and race prejudice and religious superstitions, and have no sympathy with our Americanism. They have their forebodings as to the union of Jews and Catholics in their opposition to the Bible in our public schools. And they are determined that Romanism, with its political ambitions and with whatever allies it may have, shall not carry out any plot against our free institutions and against the very government itself.

The prosperity that followed the war attracted hordes of newcomers who were welcomed by the native Americans to operate factories, build railroads and fill up the waste spaces—"developing the country" it was called.

These new immigrants were no longer exclusively members of the Nordic race as were the earlier ones who came of their own impulse to improve their social conditions. The transportation lines advertised America as a land flowing with milk and honey and the European governments took the opportunity to unload upon careless, wealthy and hospitable America the sweepings of their jails and asylums. The result was that the new immigration . . . contained a large and increasing number of the weak, the broken and the mentally crippled of all races drawn from the lowest stratum of the Mediterranean basin and the Balkans, together with hordes of the wretched, submerged populations of the Polish Ghettos. Our jails, insane asylums and almshouses are filled with this human flotsam and the whole tone of American life, social, moral and political has been lowered and vulgarized by them.

With a pathetic and fatuous belief in the efficacy of American institutions and environment to reverse or obliterate immemorial hereditary tendencies, these newcomers were welcomed and given a share in our land and prosperity. The American taxed himself to sanitate and educate these poor helots and as soon as they could speak English, encouraged them to enter into the political life, first of municipalities and then of the nation. . . .

These immigrants adopt the language of the native American, they wear his clothes, they steal his name and they are beginning to take his women, but they seldom adopt his religion or understand his ideals and while he is being elbowed out of his own home the American looks calmly abroad and urges on others the suicidal ethics which are exterminating his own race. . . .

As to what the future mixture will be it is evident that in large sections of the country the native American will entirely disappear. He will not intermarry with inferior races and he cannot compete in the sweat shop and in the street trench with the newcomers. Large cities from the days of Rome, Alexandria, and Byzantium have always been gathering points of diverse races, but New York is becoming a *cloaca gentium* which will produce many amazing racial hybrids and some ethnic horrors that will be beyond the powers of future anthropologists to unravel.

One thing is certain: in any such mixture, the surviving traits will be determined by competition between the lowest and most primitive elements and the specialized traits of Nordic man; his stature, his light colored eyes, his fair skin and light colored hair, his straight nose and his splendid fighting and moral qualities, will have little part in the resultant mixture.

Appendix #4

Guide for a Family History

History 043
The Minority Experience

GUIDE FOR A FAMILY HISTORY*

This project will probably be one of the most interesting you will complete at Alverno College. Why? Because it is about you--directly and personally. For perhaps the first time someone--you--will systematically investigate your family.

1) Identify your subject:

Your family is bigger than you think! Try and focus on one generational line. Don't try to write the history of each aunt, uncle, or cousin. Bring in these people only if they highlight the immediate object of your study. For example, the religion, occupation, and residence of your aunts and uncles should be mentioned. It provides the needed perspective to understand your parents and grandparents. But avoid unnecessary detail. Facts related to distant relative are important, but they are not central to your paper. Some of the geneological charts included with these materials will help you identify your subject.

2) The Historian's Task:

You are historians working to piece together a story. You will find your work to be surprisingly like that of a detective. You must gather evidence, collect data, sort out the contradictions, and give it all meaning. But what kind of meaning? Historians are generally concerned with change over time. How has your family changed from generation to generation? What changes do you see in such areas as education, occupation, residence, religion, and marriage patterns? Has your family become more of less wealthy?? Has its social position gone up or gone down?

Of course while this information is interesting simply because it is interesting, I am asking you to do more with it. Keep one eye constantly on the larger themes of the minority experience in America. How do the experiences of your family match those of the minority in general? Where are the points of convergence? Where are they divergent? Why does your family diverge or converge with the broader minority experience?

3) Tools:

How do historians gather their information? What are their sources? The answer is simple. Historians can legitimately use any source which can inform them of the past (fortune tellers and mystics excepted). Be creative. Use your imaginations. Here are some suggestions.

a) Oral interviews: Talk to the members of your family--parents, aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents. It is amazing how much you will be able to learn, and how far back the story might go.

*This guide is loosely adapted from Jim Watts and Allen F. Davis, Generations: Your Family in Modern American History (New York: Knopf, 1978), pp. 235-253.

Interviewing is a delicate art at best. You will be wasting your time, and the time of those you interview, if you merely asking "tell me all you know about the past." A good interviewer must know the proper questions to ask. A good interviewer makes extensive preparation prior to interviewing a subject. Be ready and able to direct your subject to the desired information.

Perhaps a word of warning is necessary here. NEVER force your subject into an area into which they do not want to go. Remember, the memories of a grandparent are part of your history--BUT THEY ARE PART OF THEIR LIVES! Always respect their rights to privacy. If they want to talk--and most people will want to talk--wonderful. If they do not, you have no right to force them to do so. In fact, most of your subjects will want to tell you things about which you may not be interested. O.k. Listen politely. THEY are doing you the favor by talking to you, not the other way around.

b) Family Records Usually Found at Home: Most of you will discover that your families have gathered a wealth of documentation--only you never knew it before. Perhaps an old trunk in the attic, a cluttered drawer in a desk, a box in a dresser will hold a treasure for you. You will find that these written documents will provide hard factual detail to supplement your interviews. Indeed, you may find it advantageous to consult the documents before you begin to interview.

1) Birth Records: Not only do birth certificate provide the official record of a birth, but they often give the age, occupation, and birthplaces of both parents as well as the mother's maiden name. These birth certificates may give you a "lead" on further evidence. In some cases, when original records have been lost, destroyed, or never made in the first place, church records (baptismal), school records, family Bible records, or the testimony of relatives can provide the information.

2) Death Certificates: These documents also contain information on the deceased beyond the actual date of death, the cause of death, and the location of the death.

3) Marriage Certificates: These will give the correct names of both partners, where they were born, and the place and date of the marriage. Both death and marriage certificates (and sometimes birth certificates) are recorded by local governments. If you know where to look, copies may be available for a nominal fee.

4) Naturalization Papers: In addition to the date and place of birth, such papers record the nationality as well as the age, and/or date of arrival in the United States and the date of naturalization, and in some cases the parents' names. If you cannot find these papers and know that an ancestor was naturalized, it is possible to locate the records--but it is usually a very difficult task. Remember that many immigrants never were naturalized but that children born in America automatically became citizens.

5) Discharge Papers from the Armed Forces: Theseoften give he date and place of birth or of induction as well as the highest rank achieved, number of years served, military unit, and discharge date and place.

sources you are using? I know it may be difficult and delicate work with your own families, but a historian must take the source into consideration when judging the worth of any evidence.

Remember, look for the general patterns in your family's history. Don't get stuck on details, don't go off on tangents--no matter how interesting they are. Your Uncle Fred the Big Game Hunter or your Aunt Bertha the test pilot may be fascinating people, but are they typical of your family?

Try and keep one eye on the general course of the minority experience in America. As you begin to piece together your family's story, keep asking yourself how it fits in with the bigger picture.

GOOD LUCK